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C O R R E C T E D C O P Y (TEXT)

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR AF/W, INR/AA
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TAGS: [ECON](#) [EPET](#) [EAID](#) [PGOV](#) [NI](#)
SUBJECT: NIGERIA: AMBASSADOR'S MEETING WITH NEW NIGER DELTA
MINISTER

REF: A. ABUJA 220
[1](#)B. 08 ABUJA 1347

Classified By: Political Counselor Walter Pflaumer for
reasons 1.4. (b & d).

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: On February 10, Ambassador met for the first time with Ufot Ekaette, Minister of the newly created Ministry for the Niger Delta. Ekaette began by reiterating that the creation of the Ministry in September 2008 shows President Yar'Adua's seriousness in tackling the problems of the restive region. He went on to describe the stakeholders meetings he has already held in nine states in southern Nigeria, and residents' complaints of mistreatment by international oil companies (IOCs), degraded environmental conditions, and poor educational and employment prospects. The discussion also touched on USAID's projects in the region, GON plans to move forward, the role the Gulf of Guinea Energy Security Strategy (GGESS) might play in improving security and development, and relations between the Ministry and the Niger Delta Development Corporation (NDDC), among other matters. Throughout, Ekaette was affable, open, and earnest, but seemed totally ignorant of some issues, and was able to add little of substance about others. Minister of State for the Niger Delta, Godsdag Orubebe, also took part in the meeting. END SUMMARY.

[1](#)2. (C) On February 10, the Ambassador had her first official meeting with Minister for the Niger Delta Ufot Ekaette. Minister of State Godsdag Orubebe was also present. Ekaette described his first steps in his new position, which were to hold community meetings in nine states in the Niger Delta region. He said this created an "environment of acceptance" in which stakeholders felt free to voice their initial suspicions of the Federal Government's motives in creating the new ministry and appointing two Niger Delta natives to head it. He also said they felt free to complain about what they say is long-standing mistreatment suffered at the hands of IOCs, environmental degradation caused by oil spills and exploration, and the lack of educational and employment opportunities they expected to come from oil extraction near

their villages. Ekaette said that while he sympathized with the privation they had suffered, he told them very firmly that the criminality some of their youths had taken up was self-defeating. Ekaette said that the people were weary of conflict and strife, and were ready for things to change. To that end, Ekaette said that he had met with representatives from the UN Development Program to discuss disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration of "militants" into society. (FYI: while Nigerians commonly refer to armed groups in the Delta as "militants," this does not necessarily imply that they are politically motivated; most of their leaders are not. End FYI.)

¶3. (C) Orubebe went on to describe his own tour of the region, saying he had spoken to both "militants" and IOC executives. He claimed to have visited such notorious "militants" as Ateke Tom, Tom Polo, and Boyloaf in their own camps, emphasizing to them that while the Government held justice, law, and order in one hand, it held an olive branch in the other. Orubebe claimed that the "militants" are ready to give up their activities, but felt let down by the Yar'Adua administration's previous attempts to reach out to them. They recalled that Vice President Goodluck Jonathan visited them in their camps, and asked for three months to bring about changes, which they say never occurred. Ekaette broke in at this point and said that attempts at persuading the Delta's "militants" to lay down their arms were undermined by the lucrative nature of some of their activities such as kidnapping, the incidence of which he said the GON had sometimes made worse by paying ransoms. He claimed, however, that those days were over, and that the GON had stopped paying ransoms. Ekaette would not confirm whether plans for a conditional amnesty were in the works, saying only that the "package" that the GON would offer "militants" had not yet been finalized, but that when it was, it was "expected that friendly countries like the U.S. would step in" to help. Orubebe went on to say that they made the IOCs understand that they were the "root" of the Niger Delta's problems, and that they had to work together with communities to find solutions to their grievances. The Ambassador emphasized that, whichever approach the GON took toward formulating a final solution, the sequencing of the various steps and engagement with vital stakeholders would be critical for success. Ekaette nodded in agreement, but appeared to have not considered the subject before.

¶4. (C) In speaking of his Ministry's budget, Ekaette said that it was insufficient, and might bring an observer to the conclusion that the GON was not serious about making the Ministry a useful partner in solving the problems of the Niger Delta. (NOTE: The Ministry's 2009 budget is 50 billion naira -- around \$340 million, but all but around \$120 million is said to be allocated to one project, the East-West Road; many observers view this as an insufficient sum for the rest of the Ministry's 2009 needs. END NOTE.) But he said the budget was determined before the Ministry even existed, and added that he had not ruled out asking for supplemental funds from the National Assembly once he had had time to assess the Ministry's needs, which, combined with the Niger Delta Technical Committee's Report and a score of previous reports going back to 1958, would lead to his Ministry's plan of action. As for clarifying the relationship between the Ministry and the Niger Delta Development Corporation (NDDC; COMMENT: Post has heard that the relationship is a difficult one -- see reftel A. END COMMENT), he said that the GON is setting up a committee to study the proper place that parastatals should occupy in the Government. He agreed that the NDDC must eventually be brought under control of the Ministry, with its mandate refocused to include only major development projects, and not smaller ones, like boreholes, which should be the responsibility of States and Local Government Areas. Finally, Ekaette agreed with the Ambassador that this might require an actual change of legal status for the NDDC, as it currently, by law, reports directly to the President.

¶5. (C) The meeting ended with Orubebe requesting USG aid in tracking the small arms and light weapons (SALW) that flow

into the Niger Delta, and help tracking the ships that transport stolen oil. He also mentioned the possibility of the GON convening a donor's conference to try and corral more resources and aid from Nigeria's international partners. Ambassador responded by reminding both Ministers of the long list of projects the USG is currently undertaking in the region, our previous offers of aid to which the GON has never responded (including those related to SALW control; reftel B), and the fact that a forum in which the GON and friendly governments can seek solutions to the Niger Delta's problems -- the GGESS -- already exists. Neither man seemed aware of the GGESS' existence, so Ambassador promised to follow up with a letter describing the GGESS and its potential.

16. (C) COMMENT: The appointment of Ekaette and Orubebe seems so far to be largely what Niger Delta indigenes suspected -- that by merely appointing regional natives to important slots, the GON thinks it can buy credibility and goodwill without doing the hard work required to find solutions to longstanding problems (e.g. Goodluck Jonathan's inept handling of the Niger Delta Summit in 2008). It is far too early to judge the outcome of the Ministry's efforts, but early signs are not encouraging. Neither Ekaette nor Orubebe seemed so far to have done much homework on the state of affairs they are inheriting, and, given the weakened naira and the low price of crude oil on the global market, the GON will find it difficult to get the money to give the new Ministry a fighting chance to make a difference -- even if the political will exists to do so. END COMMENT.

17. (U) This cable was coordinated with Consulate Lagos.

SANDERS